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**A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF *CAREFUL* AND *LIAM WINSTON PRESENTS: AN
EVENING OF COMEDY FOR THE EVERYDAY MAN AND WOMAN* IN RELATION TO
SATIRE AND SILENCE WITHIN COMEDY**

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requirements for the MA (res) in Directing

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During laughter, the audience's attention shifts from the actors onto itself; too many laughs ultimately interfere with the audience's "willing suspension of disbelief."
(Aaron, S. 1986, Pg. 54)

Aaron's (1986) critical understanding illustrates the disposition of the audience in relation to comedy; by suggesting that laughter makes the individual self-aware, it is my understanding that the audience is capable of assessing the performance in relation to their own lives, which is what makes comedy an attractive theatrical form. In this sense, my intentions to use comedy to reframe an issue, whether it is political or social in nature, can reveal the absurdity of said issue and potentially deconstruct the ideals of the individual, or help to assert pre-existing notions of right and wrong. Aaron's (1986) description suggests that the act of laughter does interfere with how engrossed in the performance the individual may be (whether the individual is alone in laughing or not.) However, this serves as a distancing tool for the performance itself, as Brecht (1967) describes as "*Verfremdung*" in *Gesammelte Werke in 20 Banden*.

The influence behind the content of the two performances was predominantly the use of satire in Chris Morris' *Brass Eye* (1997-2001) and *The Day Today* (1994) as well as how silence is used to comic effect in Caroline Ahern and Craig Cash's *The Royale Family* (1998-). However, the internal logic of the shows was influenced by *Forced Entertainment's* "Spectacular" (2008) in that it can be seen as a satirical look at the conventions of theatre; in particular, the audience member who walks into the theatre expecting a certain standard of performance, and is faced with a poorly rehearsed, both over and under-acted disaster. As with most modern art, it can evoke a range of different reactions from the observer; from humour to disappointment to anger, but ultimately probing why these systems of convention are cherished in the way they are. In a different sense, the work of *The Wooster Group*, in particular "Route 1 & 9" (1981) also influenced the performances in the manner in which it confronts the audience an intensely serious subject matter such as, in this example, racial discrimination and juxtaposes it with humour in a way that could be perceived as the exact intolerance they are trying to highlight (particularly when its known to be a recreation of a Pigmeat Markham black-face routine) The use of character to highlight ignorance is a very difficult and slight line to tread, but one which is done so by a lot of the comedians that

influenced these performances, including Chris Morris in *The Day Today* (1994) in which he blacked-up as a gangster rapper called "Fur-Q" in the style of a music video called "Uzi-lover" with excessively violent lyrics, inter-cut with interviews with him explaining his poorly thought-out reasoning for his lyrics. As the performers did in *The Wooster Group* with "Route 1 & 9", Morris took a contentious subject (in this case the debate about the effect of violent lyrics) and presented it in a different framework, which sets it up for debate. With both performances, the audience was the main focus of the material (both directly and indirectly, in terms of performance) and Susan Bennett's *Theatre Audiences* (1990) was integral to the logic of the process. This critical evaluation will examine the use of satire and silence within both the performances of *Careful* and *Liam Winston Presents*, with specific reference to the audience.

Satire

Satire is defined by American stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce as:

Satire is tragedy plus time. You give it enough time, the public, the reviewers will allow you to satirize it. Which is rather ridiculous, when you think about it. (Bruce, L. 1970, pg. 48)

This is true to a certain extent; "*Satire is tragedy plus time*" is accurate, but the immediate is always open to satire. Satire does not necessarily need tragedy to work, as political satire has always proved because even the most recent and trivial matters are open to satire. If the subject matter were tragic in nature, then this quote would be relevant, however any piece of theatre, be it tragedy, comedy or otherwise, can be viewed as having elements of satire within, even if intends to be truthful or praising of a character or a real person; the simple act of presenting it on stage, leaves the events open to the interpretation of the audience that it could argue an underlying criticism of them. Robert Harris (1990) wrote about the nature of satire:

It seems to me a contradiction in terms to say, as some have (see, for example, Clark 498-505), that satire need have no moral lesson or didactic purpose, for the essence of satire is aggression or criticism, and criticism (previous to the era of existentialistic nihilism) has always implied a systematic measure of good and bad. An object is criticized because it falls short of some standard which the critic desires that it should reach. Inseparable from any definition of satire is its corrective purpose, expressed through a critical mode which ridicules or otherwise attacks those conditions needing reformation in the opinion of the satirist. I believe there is no satire without this corrective purpose (...) the purpose of satire is the correction or deterrence of vice,

and its method is to attack hypocrisy through the ironic contrast between values and actions. (Harris, R. 1990 [website])

Expanding on the effect of this, Hodgart (1969) suggests:

Satire can turn from a state of mind into art only when it combines aggressive denunciation with some aesthetic features which can cause pure pleasure in the spectator. The spectator, indeed, may identify himself with the satirist and share his sense of superiority. (Hodgart, M. 1969, pg11)

This "sense of superiority" is what I explored in *Liam Winston Presents* as a source of satire itself. This is, as Pollard, A. (1970) describes, is due to:

The satirist may seem to condemn too easily, even to enjoy doing it. His enthusiasm with verbal bludgeon, rapier or 'mighty flail'; is often the evidence of such enjoyment. He asks us to admire the skill with which he uses these weapons, to recognize him as an artist and satire as an art. (Pollard, A. 1970, pg1)

When referring to 'satire' within this evaluation, this should be read as a term to describe overtly satirical works, that it is politically orientated, in the partisan sense.

In *Liam Winston Presents*, the intention was that the "Director" character attempts to take on the role of the infallible satirist, but is without the complete understanding of the subjects he is attempting to satire. The "Director" (who mentions throughout the show that he also wrote the sketches) was to present the identity of the writer and then have that identity obvious within the sketches. The character also had to be arrogant so that I was satirizing the director's role in theatre. This is influenced by Chris Morris' self-titled character in both *The Day Today* (1994) and *Brass Eye* (1997-2001) in which the character is a self-important, bullying, Jeremy Paxman-esque news anchor. It was satirical of the intensely serious manner in which the evening news was presented; the anchor speaking in a tone of voice which suggested he was skeptical of any politician, as well as how his speech pattern would rise and fall, giving the impression he is slightly bored of the news he is reporting. Randall (2010) describes the importance of adopting the character of the news anchor:

Pretentious, self-important and riddled with parochial obsession, news programmes had never been questioned in such detail before. Let alone by a show impudently assumed the slick confidence of its targets just to undermine them. (Randall, L. 2010, Pg 9)

For *Liam Winston Presents*, my intention was to parody the role of the director in the same way, by using the characteristics based on observation; where this differs though, is that his blatant weaknesses is what makes the character a source for satire. By having the director's

intentions to be satirical in content and failing, it became closer to a satire of satire itself. Again, based on observations, I used influence from dialogues with directors I had come into contact with who would try to explain their satirical intentions for a project, which always struck me as pretentious and a therefore good source for a comedy character.

It is always the case that the audience is willing to know more, and endure more, than the dramatist or producer trusts it with. The audience has been treated as a child even by the best theatres. It has been led to the meaning, as if truth were a lunch. The theatre is not a disseminator of truth but a provider of versions. Its statements are provisional. In a time when nothing is clear, the inflicting of clarity is a stale arrogance. (Barker, H. 1993, Pg45.)

The "truth" is often called into question by the nature of a joke surrounding a so-called 'controversial' subject matter such as jokes about rape, homosexuality or race. If this is not handled with a level of tact, or with an understanding that it is really a joke aimed at the person telling it, it can be tremendously offensive to certain people. It's my understanding that the use of satire is what makes the difference in the ethics of the joke, although this is not clear by any means, as for some the mere mention of subject that they don't feel comfortable associating with humour could be enough to offend or upset them. Whilst this is fair, it is my understanding that there are two different ways in which this is often handled; the 'shock humour' method and the 'in-character' method. An example of 'shock humour' is when Comedian Frankie Boyle made a comment on *Tramadol Nights* in December 2010 about Katie Price's disabled son, Harvey:

I have a theory that Jordan married a cage fighter, because she needed someone strong enough to stop Harvey from fucking her. (Boyle, F. 2010, [TV])

This resulted in complaints to Channel 4, as well as a complaint from Katie Price herself. The difficulty with this particular incident is that there doesn't seem to be any tangible joke involved; it is a sniping attack on a disabled child, making it hard to understand why this is supposed to be funny. Furthermore, Frankie Boyle's act doesn't appear to be a character, so it can only be assumed that he himself believes that this is a subject that should be joked about (although it could be said that all stand-up is a character in a sense, in that it is rehearsed). Boyle isn't the first act to make a comment that is supposed to be shocking, as a replacement for humour. The difference when placed within the framework of a character who is misguided or is representing a certain personality the performer can approach subjects that wouldn't normally be a cause for comedy through the use of parody, and in so doing would

twist the joke back onto the character. This is a technique used by a lot of stand-up comedians to different extents, since the introduction of 'Alternative comedy' pioneered by acts such as Alexei Sayle, (as described by Double [2005 & 1997]) and used by some of the most popular comedians in the country; Ricky Gervais, Chris Morris and Al "The Pub Landlord" Murray, in order to skate the boundaries of what is deemed morally correct, to find a certain audience. I would argue that this, however, is ethical due to the fact that almost every time the joke is satirical of a certain type of person. The 2001 '*Paedogeddon*' episode of *Brass eye* is the second most complained about event in television history in the UK (Independent Television Commission, [unknown date]), although it also received an equal amount in praise of the show. Whilst the subject it was concerned with was paedophilia, the joke was quite clearly aimed at scare-mongering news media; the episode invented desperate measures which paedophiles would go to in order to kidnap children, in more ludicrous and bizarre ways. This is satirical of how the news can be a manipulative tool to increase sales, or for any other reason. The difficulty could be that it over-exaggerates the issue in question, but the *Tonight: With Trevor McDonald* report on "To Catch A Predator" in January 2008, bore a lot of similarities in how the issue was presented in the *Paedogeddon* special (2001.)

In *Careful*, the character of Luke was how I integrated the 'In character' style of comedy; he was a grotesquely chauvinistic, homophobic racist who spoke without any consideration to who he was speaking to. It allowed me to approach subjects that fell under this category through the proviso that the character was who the joke was truly aimed at. For instance, the moment where Luke describes the intricacies of having sex with a blind girl worked on two levels; the uncomfortable experience of witnessing someone talking about that subject, and the fact that *he* is doing so. In *Liam Winston Presents*, by trying to address subject matters such as homosexuality and feminism, the director is sent up as the source of comedy by getting it so wrong. For example, in the sketch entitled 'Gay Lords say "No"' the director introduces the sketch by addressing the problems surrounding the representation of homosexuality, and then launches into a sketch that has nothing to do with it at all with the exception of the term "Gay Lord", showing his misunderstanding of the subject. Judith Butler describes in her article *Critically Queer*.

In no sense can it be concluded that the part of gender that is performed is therefore the truth of gender, performance as bounded "act" is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performers "will" or "choice", further, what is "performed" works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, un-performable. The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake. (Butler, J. 1993, Pg 225)

In this sense, the sketch from a production point of view is aware of its shortcomings and its inability to fairly discuss this subject. The decision to include this subject, and the decision to portray it in this way consciously made to parody theatre addressing so-called 'serious' or 'controversial' subjects. As Susan Bennett comments on in *Theatre Audiences* (1990):

The selection or creation of a dramatic work for public performance obviously makes that work available for selection by potential audiences. Theatre as a cultural commodity is probably best understood as the result of its conditions of production and reception. The two elements of production and reception cannot be separated, and a key area for further research is the relationship between the two specific cultural environments, for specific types of theatre, and so on. (Bennett, S. 1990, Pg 114)

The two elements of "production and reception" was what I wanted to exploit by incorporating a patronising speech style when speaking to the audience, I could use their likely disdain for The Director as a source of comedy, which as I said before, is achieved by showing his inadequacies as a director and forces the joke back on to him. The decision to have the director explaining his decisions to include the situations as they are happening on stage, or interrupt the sketches in some way, was inherent to the logic of the whole show. By representing the performance as if it were politically correct and important (in the directors eyes) but failing in these instances, the show examines the reason behind needing a voice to guide the audience. In fact, the sketches had the appearance of having the best intentions to be correct but by failing intends to ask the question: What is the point of theatre that tells an audience that homophobia, racism, sexism etc. is wrong? When studying for my BA, I attended a student performance in April 2009, which was a 50-minute dance piece, which sometimes violently represented the act of rape. The performance, whilst expertly executed, served no purpose but to shock the audience. It could not possibly have changed the viewpoints of anybody. Presumably, everybody who went into the theatre knew that rape is wrong, and it is unlikely that this had changed when people had left. It was theatre without a purpose; it had highlighted a subject that is generally agreed upon, but nothing was questioned by doing so. The general consensus when discussing this show with audience

members was that it was "moving". This as a purpose for creating a show was what influenced *Liam Winston Presents* heavily. David Savran (1986) quotes an interview with Elizabeth LeCompte about the performance of *Route 1 & 9* by *The Wooster Group*, which featured the use of blackface:

"In the controversy over *Route 1 & 9*, one of the things that was said was, "There is no distance on it." In other words, it was racist, because there wasn't a character or voice of authority saying, "Look, this is a horrible thing. This is racist." I suspect that if Spalding had been off to the side saying in one way or another, "I deplore this," it would have been alright. Everyone would have said, "Oh, this guy is dealing with his racism on the stage," instead of the audience having to deal with the racism unmediated. (Savran, D. 1986, Pg 41)

The Wooster Group felt that to explain their reasoning behind their decision to use black face, by having a narrator announcing it, was to diminish the message of the piece, or at least became aware of this following the response to the performance. In *Liam Winston Presents*, I highlighted this by making the director's narration of the show as misguided as I could. A more obvious example of this would be how he describes the sketch entitled 'Feminism' as exploring feminist issues and compliments himself on his ability to write for women, and then produces a male-centric vision of women's issues.

What naturally comes from witnessing somebody arrogant failing in their attempts to achieve something, resulting in that person's humiliation is a type of slightly uncomfortable humour, which is ultimately satisfying when the audience member knows it isn't happening to them. This can be seen in *Careful* when Pete lies about his experience with drugs in order to impress the other characters, and ends up having to build on his lies resulting in his inexperience being highlighted, also in *Liam Winston Presents*, during a sketch entitled "Feminism" the Director loses control of his actors as he pushes one into performing something she doesn't want to, prompting her to walk off stage. The embarrassment that manifests itself as silence, as well as the disruption of language and communication, can lead to a momentary loss of reputation or identity. This arguably exposes a latent fear in the spectator, which produces laughter. This ties in with the notion of satire, as a loss of reputation is to deconstruct the position that individual holds.

Silence

The fascination with failure bespeaks a healthy distrust of glib or overconfident effect. Performance language has become self-conscious, selfdoubting, hesitant. Nothing can be effortless now, and even if one does see something simple or perfect or whole (the hyper-real sets for Steve Shill's solo theatre pieces), or a moment that attempts a perfect narrative closure (I'm thinking of a tiny image towards the end of The Wooster Group's St. Anthony) then these things automatically, and quite deliberately, problematise themselves. (Etchells, T. 1999, p 207.)

In *Liam Winston Presents* the show opens with a "support act" stand-up comedian who breaks down over the course of his material and leaves early, and in *Careful*, the show ends with a long silence as if its going to be a happy ending with the prospect of the two characters of Pete and Amy beginning a relationship, before she leaves to meet her boyfriend. Whilst the latter of the two may not be completely related to failure, it somewhat distracts the whole performance; *Careful* was intended not have a narrative as such, but a series of conversations and moments, and to end it on, as Etchells (1999) describes as "a perfect narrative closure", would be to betray this idea completely. The moments of silence throughout the performance would become redundant if the show was to suddenly try and wrap everything up towards the end. Instead, by ending the show as if there would be a continuation of the banality of the situation, is to evoke the somewhat satirical nature behind the performance; to highlight that drama doesn't have to have a series of increasingly unlikely situations to be inherently entertaining. The long periods of silence in *Careful* in which the reasons were indistinguishable as intentional or otherwise was to encourage the audience member to search for something in a look, a gesture or even in the silences themselves, that perhaps wasn't there. This is used to great effect in *The Royale Family* (1998-) but with a slightly different outcome; the long periods of silence are more of a depiction of the banality of family life within a comedy framework. With *Careful*, I drew influence from *Forced Entertainment* in their aim to force the audience into questioning not what they are seeing, but the message behind it as a criticism of theatre on the whole. In the performance *Spectacular* by *Forced Entertainment*, an element explored is the idea of a show gone wrong, as if falling apart at the seams. A man in a skeleton suit describes what the show could have been like, as if that is an acceptable replacement for it. As with *Liam Winston Presents*, *Spectacular* identifies its own performed shortcomings, in a sense, by blatantly pointing them out.

Conclusion

Nicholas Ridout (2006) talks about the impact that failure can have on the audience, in his assessment of a quote by Alan Read (1993) on this subject;

(...)in a theatre that is less heavily insured against the risks of going wrong than most professional ventures, one that does not rely for its perpetuation upon routinely going right, we might glimpse something of theatre's 'margin' or 'inside'; an anomaly that points unerringly to something wrong within the theatre that wants so desperately not to go wrong. That we might look for the 'corpses' and the 'collapses', and value these 'anomalies' in spite of the fact that they appear to offer meagre returns for the rational investor. Theatre's 'misplaced ineptitude' may lie in its over-investment in that which it 'represents', while its properly placed ineptitude, its wrongplaced rightplaceness, might lie in an under-investment in mastery, technique, and perfection and a counter-investment in some kind of failure to master the techniques of perfect representation. It may have something to do, then, with the space between representation and its failure. (Ridout, N. 2006, Pg32-33)

Ridout identifies the relationship between the audience and the performers on stage in relation to failure; the audience both want to see these 'anomalies' and feel a level of discomfort if they occur. This fear and hope of the two possibilities, produces a certain awkward experience for the audience member; the simplest way to explain this is to relate it specifically with amateur stand-up comedy. The moment that any stand-up makes the first joke that doesn't quite sit right, or isn't well executed enough, the mood of the audience instantly changes. Whenever I am watching an amateur stand-up fail, I find myself both wanting the act to pull the audience back, as well as seeing him or her crash and burn. It makes for a much more entertaining experience, and makes your relationship with the performer rather emotionally invested. What I aimed to achieve with both performances (for different reasons) is a certain level of discomfort for the audience – not so much, that they are unable to find enjoyment in the dialogue or the performances, but so there is a feeling that something is slightly disjointed about the show. In *Careful* this was achieved through long periods of silence which stretched for set amounts of time through the show. In *Liam Winston Presents* this was achieved with dysfunction on stage and a feeling that the show is falling apart at the seams (again drawing influence from *Spectacular by Forced Entertainment*). The slippage in timing of the rhythm of comedy at occasions, in both performances, creates a kind of dramaturgy that frames silences as a specific tool for comedy. It was inherent to the sense of both pieces that they held this kind of control over the audience; the performers on stage knew what they were doing, but to make them feel like we didn't is to perform at a higher standard. Auslander (1997) states that:

Jerry Seinfeld summarizes the essential relationship between audience and comic succinctly: "To laugh is to be dominated" (Auslander, P. 1997, Pg. 111)

Zarrlli (1995) cites States (1983) to address that:

In cathartic terms, laughter is the dialectical opposite of tragic silence. As everyone knows, it is hard to laugh in a half-empty theatre, and it is even harder to act the comedy that is supposed to release the laughter (...) It follows that the genre that produces laughter for its living is the most social of all the dramatic forms, except possibly the masque, just as tragedy is the most non-social, at least from the standpoint of emotional logic. (States, B. O. 1983, Pg. 30)

States has identified tragic silence and laughter as two completely opposing entities in terms of cathartics; to conclude this evaluation, it must be proved how I created both performances whilst considering both of these, as I have argued throughout. Firstly, it must be addressed that as my intentions were to involve both silence and moments where it was comfortable to laugh. In reality, a majority of both performances were firmly intending to be humorous, moments of silence or disruption were a temporary lapse in the performances, designed to throw the audience off momentarily. It is also true that an audience does not maintain one constant mood, which resulted in varied results from performance to performance. However, the logic that the silences portrayed on stage would result in silence in the audience is flawed, as laughter often manifested, if only slightly.

It is important to note that laughter is not always the sole purpose of comedy; if the same individual were to watch any comedy alone instead (although the performance may differ somewhat, as States [1983] describes) it is unlikely that an audience member would laugh as much as being in a theatre, cinema etc. surrounded by other people who were reacting in their own way to the performance. However, it is not to say that the individual would have a different interpretation of the performance in either one of these situations. Silence and laughter can work as counters to each other, as to break the uncomfortable nature of silence with the permission to laugh by the performers, provides cathartic relief which feeds into the next silence, and so on.

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